

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2006

LOWER VENTURA RIVER HABITAT RESTORATION

File No. 06-019

Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to Santa Barbara Channelkeeper to conduct water quality monitoring and identify habitat restoration opportunities in the Lower Ventura River watershed to assist in restoration of native coastal and riparian habitat for southern steelhead trout and other sensitive species within the Ventura River.

LOCATION: Ventura River watershed, Ventura County (Exhibits 1 and 2). The entire Ventura River watershed encompasses approximately 226 square miles in Ventura County.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location map

Exhibit 2: Map of Lower Ventura River & monitoring sites

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution, pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to Santa Barbara Channelkeeper to undertake water quality monitoring and identify habitat restoration opportunities in the Lower Ventura River watershed, subject to the following condition: Prior to the disbursement of any funds, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, and schedule; the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work; and written evidence of each landowner’s permission to enter the project site for purposes of the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria in Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The project area has been identified in the certified Local Coastal Program of Ventura County as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems.
 4. Santa Barbara Channelkeeper is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursing \$100,000 to Santa Barbara Channelkeeper to implement a program of water quality monitoring and identification of habitat restoration opportunities in the Lower Ventura River watershed (see Exhibit 2).

The program has several goals: to collect baseline data on the health of the Ventura River watershed, to educate and train a force of volunteer watershed stewards, and to identify sources of pollution in the watershed. Building on information collected over the last five years by Channelkeeper’s Stream Team Program, Channelkeeper will identify specific impairments to water quality and the riparian habitat of the River. Channelkeeper will then utilize this information to compile a comprehensive list of restoration opportunities in the watershed, and develop conceptual plans for the implementation of at least two of these restoration projects.

The data collected by the Ventura Stream Team will serve as an excellent source of information about normal, or baseline, conditions throughout the watershed. In the future, these data can be used as a yardstick to compare how water quality conditions change over time. In addition, the data will enable Channelkeeper to identify problem areas throughout the watershed, which can also be used to guide future clean-up and restoration efforts by environmental groups and regulatory agencies,

The project would focus on those sections of the river that run from (and include) San Antonio Creek to the estuary. It would be implemented in three phases:

During the first phase, Channelkeeper will conduct a comprehensive review of the existing management and restoration history of the Ventura River. In addition to completing a relevant literature review, Channelkeeper will coordinate with local stakeholder groups and government agencies by interviewing key personnel and by participating in existing stakeholder meetings and processes. Channelkeeper will work with these agencies to make use of existing information including GIS datasets, layers, and maps. This coordination will ensure that related efforts are not duplicated and that the interests and needs of the broader community are incorporated into future restoration projects. The first phase of work will also include the continuation and aug-

mentation of Channelkeeper's existing volunteer-based water quality monitoring project, the Ventura Stream Team. That effort will be augmented by adding sampling sites in the estuary and one or two other locations as necessary, and conducting two monitoring events whose samples will be analyzed for the "full suite" of pollutants (including volatile organic compounds, pesticides, herbicides, PCBs, MBAS, and oil and grease. The information to be collected by this project is becoming increasingly useful for establishing baseline water quality conditions in the watershed, detecting specific ecological and water quality impairments, evaluating the success of previous restoration projects and water quality improvement efforts, facilitating the eventual development of Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) for the Ventura River and estuary, and informing the identification of restoration opportunities.

During the second phase of the project, Channelkeeper will use the information garnered from the first phase to conduct targeted stream surveys of the river and selected tributaries. Through these surveys, Channelkeeper will identify, map, and photo-document problem areas and potential restoration opportunities throughout the lower River and its tributaries. These opportunities may include potential barriers to fish passage, collapsing or unstable stream banks, impermeable and failing bank modifications, infringing and impacting adjacent land uses, large patches of invasive vegetation, trash or waste dump sites, recreation and educational opportunities, and other conditions that may adversely affect water quality and riparian habitat.

In the third phase of this project, Channelkeeper will compile a comprehensive, integrated, and prioritized menu of restoration opportunities for the lower Ventura River and its tributaries. The menu will include maps, figures, photographs and detailed descriptions of each potential project. Channelkeeper will also develop a conceptual design for at least two of these restoration projects to galvanize future implementation efforts.

Throughout this entire project, Channelkeeper will utilize the experience and expertise of Heal the Bay's established Stream Team program, which has made a significant contribution to restoration of the Malibu Creek Watershed and Santa Monica Bay. Since its inception in 1998 more than 5,000 volunteers have been trained to conduct water quality and/or Stream Habitat Surveys. The Stream Team Program has been highly successful and is being emulated in other regional watersheds. In addition, its Stream Team Field Guide and Stream Team Equipment Kit have been adapted for use throughout Southern California region and have radically improved the accuracy and reliability of citizen monitoring data and its use among resource management agencies.

In 2001 the Coastal Conservancy awarded Heal the Bay \$350,600 of funds from Proposition 12 to implement the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Plan to expedite Stream Team data collection and expand water quality monitoring. The habitat surveys produced by this project mapped and monitored invasive vegetation to improve the effectiveness of Conservancy-funded *Arundo donax* and invasive vegetation removal projects within the watershed. Stream habitat assessments also identified and mapped point and non-point source pollution sources so that they could be targeted for removal, eroding stream banks for restoration planning and prioritization, and barriers that prevent the upstream migration of endangered steelhead trout.

WATERSHED DESCRIPTION

The Ventura River watershed encompasses about 226 square miles and is roughly 31 miles long between its headwaters in upper Matilija canyon in Los Padres National Forest and the outfall into the Pacific. The mainstem of the River originates at the junction of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek and flows about 15.6 miles to the ocean. Downstream the River's principal tributaries are San Antonio Creek, Willis Creek, Rice Creek, Coyote Creek and Cañada Larga.

The major issue within the watershed has been the dramatic decline of Southern California steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a federally listed endangered species. Until the late 1940's the river ran essentially unimpeded to the ocean, and 4,000 to 5,000 adult steelhead would migrate up the river each year to spawn and rear, creating within the Ventura River one of the largest steelhead runs in the state.

But in 1948, the Ventura County Flood Control District built the 198-foot high Matilija Dam on the Ventura River to control flooding and alleviate persistent water supply shortages that supposedly plagued the watershed since the 1920s. The dam--- located approximately 0.6 miles upstream of the junction of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek---included no fish passage and thus cutoff access to more than half of the historic steelhead spawning grounds. In the next two decades, the Bureau of Reclamation built other dams and diversions along several of the main creeks that feed the Ventura River, further impeding the river's natural flow.

Although Matilija Dam was constructed with a design reservoir capacity of more than 7,000 acre feet, notching in 1965 and 1978 and massive sedimentation have reduced the reservoir's capacity to less than 500 acre feet. Over 6 million cubic yards of sediment are estimated to reside in the reservoir, and the reservoir is projected to fill in completely by 2020. Within the past decade, a concerted effort has been made to develop a coordinated engineering and funding strategy for removal of the dam. Removal of Matilija Dam would not only allow for fish passage to historic steelhead breeding waters in the upper watershed, and greatly enhance the opportunities for restored habitat for the other species of concern, but it would also restore natural sediment transport downstream to nourish the region's beaches.

Because much of the river corridor has retained its rural character, there are a number of relatively intact examples of riparian cottonwood, California black walnut, sycamore and oak woodlands, as well as chaparral, flood plain, and grassland habitats along the river. The diverse habitats of the River and its watershed include high numbers of plant and animal species. Habitats in and near the Ventura River area sustain some of the highest diversity of vertebrate species in Southern California; nearly 300 vertebrate species are known in the lower reaches of the Ventura River alone. At least 26 special status species inhabit or utilize the aquatic, riparian and wetland habitats in the watershed, including 13 listed species (endangered, threatened or fully protected) and 13 California species of special concern. In addition to steelhead, the listed species include tidewater goby, Least Bell's vireo, Southwestern willow flycatcher, California brown pelican, California least tern, peregrine falcon, Belding's savannah sparrow, ringtail, black-shouldered kite, western snowy plover, California red-legged frog and the California condor.

PROJECT HISTORY

For a number of years, the Coastal Conservancy and other state agencies have supported

community efforts to enhance, protect and restore the Ventura River watershed. They include the Matilija Dam Evaluation Project and Matilija Dam Removal Feasibility Study, a grant to the Casitas Municipal Water to fund the design and construction of a fish ladder at the Robles Diversion on the mainstem, and a \$132,000 grant to the Ventura County Watershed Protection District to help fund *Arundo* removal on a five-acre parcel along the Ventura River near Casitas Springs.

A \$3.1 million grant from the Coastal Conservancy allowed the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to acquire the 1,556-acre Fairmont Ranch along the River, a site now known as the OVLC's Ventura River Preserve. In 2004, a \$450,000 grant from the Coastal Conservancy helped the OVLC acquire 14 acres in fee and a conservation easement of 16 acres of the OVLC's Confluence Property on the Ventura River at the mouth of San Antonio Creek. The property includes almost one-half mile of the Ventura River and San Antonio Creek as well as mature riparian, cottonwood, and sycamore forest.

In July 2005, the governing board of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project approved adding to its work plan a programmatic project known as the Ventura River Parkway. Patterned after the Conservancy's river parkway program for the Santa Clara River in Ventura County, the program involves a multi-phased effort to acquire and restore a series of key riparian parcels along the Ventura River with the goal of creating a contiguous corridor of habitat and recreational open space along the river from Ojai to the estuary. The goal of this program---to be implemented in partnership with a number of other agencies and organizations---is to create a comprehensive river parkway along the lower 15 miles of the river. Because of the regional importance of the Ventura River corridor, a comprehensive river parkway program would help restore habitat linkages and connectivity, reconnect creek and river corridors to their floodplains, restore riparian and aquatic habitat, remove invasive species, and stabilize streambanks through environmentally-sensitive measures

The project to be implemented with the funds being requested here would complement the Conservancy's other efforts in the Ventura River watershed. Santa Barbara Channelkeeper has been involved with water quality issues in the Ventura River since 2001 with the inception of the Ventura River Stream Team project. Stream Team is a volunteer-based water quality monitoring project designed to provide a comprehensive and long-term effort to monitor conditions along the Ventura River and its tributaries.

Ventura Stream Team conducts monthly on-site testing at 15 designated locations on the Ventura River and its major tributaries. Data collected include on-site measurements of dissolved oxygen, turbidity, conductivity, pH, temperature, and flow. Water samples collected at each site are processed in Channelkeeper's laboratory for three Public Health bacterial indicators using approved standard methodology. Additional samples are analyzed for nutrients (ammonium, nitrite plus nitrate, orthophosphate, total dissolved nitrogen and particulate carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus) through cooperation with the Santa Barbara Channel – Long Term Ecological Research Project (SBC-LTER) at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Visual observations such as vegetation and aquatic life are also recorded monthly at each site. To date, over 350 volunteers have participated in the project, contributing over 3,600 hours of their time to this monitoring effort.

In 2004, Channelkeeper briefly surveyed the lower stretch of San Antonio Creek, documenting

impairments, including the presence of severely unstable stream-banks, significant direct pollutant loading from equestrian and cattle ranches, and large patches of invasive vegetation. This information will all be used to help identify restoration opportunities as part of the proposed project.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
SEP program funds from Ojai Sanitary District ¹	\$57,000
Internal Channelkeeper funds	\$3,000
Total Project Cost	\$160,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Habitat Conservation Fund, which provides funding to the Coastal Conservancy to implement wetland and riparian habitat restoration projects along the coast. This project would provide for the identification and conceptual planning for riparian habitat projects along the Lower Ventura River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251-31270), regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

Under §31251, the Conservancy may award grants for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources that, because of natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would lead to improvements in the quality and availability of habitat in the lower Ventura River watershed by identifying sources of pollution and habitat restoration opportunities along the river and its tributaries.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31252, because the certified Local Coastal Program of the City of Ventura, as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies" section below.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. In the present instance

¹ Section IX of the State Water Board's water quality enforcement policy allows for a portion of certain penalties assessed by a RWQCB to be directed towards designated water quality improvement projects (known as Supplemental Environmental Projects) within the region in which the assessments were made. The Regional Board facilitates the SEP process by maintaining a list of re-approved projects that can be funded to offset portions of assessed penalties. Channelkeeper's Ventura River watershed monitoring program and watershed assessment is an eligible program for funding under the LA Regional Board's SEP program, and the Ojai Sanitary District is scheduled to direct \$57,000 in penalties assessed against it towards the project.

the Conservancy's contribution would represent about 62 percent of the funds needed to carry out the project. As a private, nonprofit organization qualified under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper is qualified to receive a grant from the Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by identifying threats to coastal areas for resource protection and enhancement, providing baseline information that can be used to develop and implement resource enhancement plans for sections of the Lower Ventura River and its tributaries, and developing local capacity to plan and implement resource enhancement projects.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective C**, the proposed project will help protect, restore and enhance biological diversity in coastal areas by identifying areas of non-native invasive species that threaten native coastal habitats along the Lower Ventura River and its tributaries and providing baseline information that can be used to develop and implement plans for control or eradication.

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, the proposed project will improve water quality, habitat and other coastal resources within a priority coastal watershed by evaluating resource conditions and gathering data and other information that can be used to develop restoration projects to improve riparian habitat for steelhead and other species and promote public outreach and community involvement.

The Ventura River Watershed is specifically cited in the Coastal Conservancy's *Strategic Plan* (2003, at page 55) as a locus for Goals 5 (Coast/Ocean Habitat) and 6 (Wetlands, Rivers & Watersheds) of the Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, adopted on January 24, 2001:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed project is supported by Assemblymember Pedro Nava and First District County Supervisor Steve Bennett, as well as by several local community-

based organizations, including the Ventura County Task Force of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.

4. **Location:** The Ventura River is a critical coastal watershed in southern California and enhancement of habitat, water quality and other natural resources in the watershed is essential to the restoration and enhancement of significant coastal resources in the state, including riparian and watershed resources.
5. **Need:** Restoration and enhancement of riparian habitat will be critical to efforts to promote the health of native coastal resources and to restore native steelhead trout runs in the Ventura River and its tributaries. At this time, the monitoring and assessment project cannot be implemented without Conservancy participation, because Channelkeeper must secure significant external funding if the project is to proceed.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Protection and restoration of the Ventura River is a regional priority because the river provides habitat and species linkages of regional and statewide significance. The river is critical to steelhead recovery in Southern California, and the Coastal Conservancy has dedicated substantial funds and staff time to various projects along the river.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The proposed grant will significantly aid current efforts to protect natural resources at risk from various encroachments and threats, including non-point source pollution. In addition, identification of restoration opportunities for riparian habitat is critical to efforts aimed at restoring native steelhead trout runs.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address coastal resource protection, habitat restoration and species protection, water quality and watershed resource protection, and public education.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above. Channelkeeper is in the process of securing SEP program funds under the auspices of the Los Angeles RWQCB and if Channelkeeper can secure the remainder of the funding from the Conservancy, it will proceed with project implementation this summer.
12. **Readiness:** By its implementation and completion of the Stream Team project for the Goleta Slough watershed in Santa Barbara County, Channelkeeper has demonstrated its ability to start and finish this project in a timely manner..
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** As noted in the “Project History” section above, the Conservancy has funded a number of acquisition and restoration projects in the Ventura River to help promote watershed restoration and achieve steelhead recovery in the River. Implementation of this project will advance previous Conservancy projects by helping to identify other restoration opportunities as well.
15. **Cooperation:** The project would represents a significant level of cooperation among Channelkeeper, private landowners, community volunteers, and other stakeholders in the Ventura River watershed, including the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, City of Ventura, County Watershed Protection District, and the Ventura Hillside Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the policy goals of the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of the City of San Buenaventura (the City of Ventura), as amended in 1990. The City's LCP includes policies which stress protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River (3.1), protection of sensitive wetland, riparian, and oak woodland habitat areas (e.g., policies 12.1, 12.4 and 12.6), preservation of the Ventura River in its existing semi-natural state and restoration to natural conditions (Policy 13.1), and cooperation with the Coastal Conservancy to protect and enhance the Ventura River estuary (policy 15.8).

The project would also help promote several major regional goals and Ventura County objectives in the Regional Strategy of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The project would help meet three of the County's key objectives: developing comprehensive programs to control and remove invasive species (particularly *Arundo donax*) from the County's watersheds; addressing wetlands and watershed issues that have the greatest potential to improve coastal water quality; and inventorying relevant data sources and establishing a clearinghouse so that information can be readily shared. The project would also promote at least four of the six Regional Goals of the Wetlands Recovery Project: restoring stream corridors in coastal watersheds, recovering native habitat and species diversity; integrating wetlands recovery with other public objectives; and promoting education related to coastal watersheds.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is (a) statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15626 because it involves only feasibility studies for possible future actions for projects that have not yet been approved, and (b) categorically exempt from CEQA under Section 15306 of the CEQA Guidelines because it will consist only of basic data collection, information gathering and resource evaluation activities which will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.